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New Era: Welcome to Vladivostok

Spy Satellites Made Soviet Far East Port's Secrecy Obsolete

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VLADIVOSTOK, Soviet Union—For almost 35 years, the Far East Soviet port of Vladivostok has been closed to nearly all foreigners to protect the military secrets of its Pacific fleet and air force.

Now, however, in the spirit of Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy, Vladivostok is about to open its doors.

A recent visit by a Los Angeles Times reporter, the first visit by any American journalist since 1975, was one signal of the imminent change of policy.

Anyone arriving at Vladivostok's airfield can see Soviet fighter planes and helicopters parked on the tarmac, while warships swinging at anchor in the city's well-protected harbor are equally visible.

Soviet officials acknowledge that U.S. spy satellites can gather more intelligence than walk-in agents of foreign governments, one reason why security concerns no longer

are the site of a Soviet-American summit meeting at which Kremlin leader Leonid I. Brezhnev and President Gerald R. Ford agreed on the outlines of an arms limitation treaty. American newsmen who accompanied Ford were confined largely to their quarters.

The region has been regarded as highly sensitive. It is the site of important military installations and it has significant oil-producing facilities. Vladivostok is headquarters for the Soviet Far East fleet.

So sensitive is the region that in September, 1983, when a Korean Air Lines jetliner strayed off course into the area, it was shot down by Soviet fighters. All of the 269 people on board the plane, which the Soviets accused of spying, were killed.

According to Anatoly S. Gobovizin, chairman of Vladivostok's municipal executive committee, it was for security reasons alone that the city was closed to visitors. But he said in an interview, "We think differently today."

"Besides," Gobovizin said, "development of a major industrial and scientific center is no longer possible without international ties to keep up with the latest in science and technology."

Gorbachev, speaking in Vladivostok last July, said he would like to see the city become "our wide-open window to the East." But he linked a decision on removing travel barriers to an improvement in the overall political situation in the Pacific region.

Since Gorbachev's speech, Vladivostok's gates have been opened to an increasing number of foreigners, Gobovizin said. Scientists from the United States, China and West European countries visited the city for a day, he recalled, and Japanese officials and reporters were allowed in recently. A big trade fair, with 40 Japanese firms expected to take part, is scheduled for this spring.

Because of its excellent harbor and steep hills, Vladivostok reminds many visitors of San Francisco, although temperatures are

considerably lower here and the harbor is iced over for two months of the year.

Moreover, because of its location—it is not far from China, North Korea and Japan—Vladivostok looks more to the outside world than most Soviet cities do. Nissan vans from Japan, men's shirts and pants from China, running shoes from North Korea—all are available in the shops here.

The Soviet Union sells lumber, coal, seafood and oil to Japan. Trade with Japan, which started 20 years ago, is valued at \$7.5 million a year.

Trade with China, resumed six years ago, is conducted through border stations. The Soviets sell refrigerators, cement, roofing materials and butter in return for clothing and textiles, pork and vegetables.

Ships based at Vladivostok call at ports in 72 countries, and in the coming years their cargoes will be expanded, Gobovizin said.

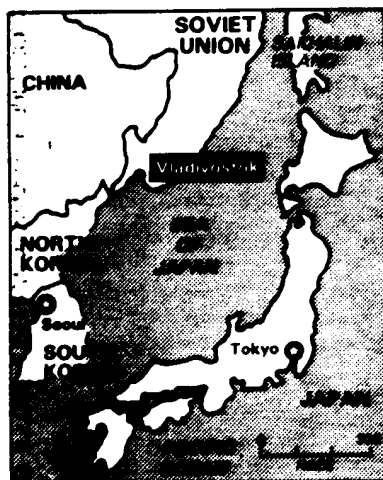
"International communications in the Pacific zone will be improved," he went on. "The market created by the Pacific states is very considerable. . . . In my view, the situation in the Pacific depends on Soviet-American relations, which have not reached the required level."

On a recent day, Vladivostok's harbor was jammed with Soviet freighters. Gray-painted warships were silhouetted against the early morning fog, and dozens of fishing ships lay at anchor across the bay.

Still, shore services are inadequate, Gorbachev said in his speech last summer. He referred specifically to repair facilities, and added that, "as a result, a considerable proportion of our expensive [fishing] fleet is lying idle."

Gorbachev also called for new approaches to developing economic ties with foreign countries, adding that the Soviet Far East provinces

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require barring visitors.

At the same time, reopening the city would advance Kremlin plans for increasing Pacific trade and speedier economic development of the Soviet Far East.

Vladivostok, the major port for receiving American lend-lease assistance during World War II, has been closed to all but a handful of foreigners since 1951, shortly after the outbreak of the Korean War.

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had an "extremely low share" of Soviet exports in spite of their vast potential.

Despite such criticism, Gorbachev was apparently delighted with his first visit to the Vladivostok area.

"You have such a wonderful region—beautiful sea, unique natural setting," he said. "It's one of the most remarkable cities of the country."

Vladivostok was founded in 1860 as a Russian military outpost and now has a population of 630,000.

According to Gobovizin, three-quarters of all the military equipment sent to the Soviet Union in World War II was landed here, including lend-lease shipments from the United States. Soviet sailors remember those "good years" of Soviet-American cooperation, he added.

He said a decision to develop Vladivostok was made after Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev visited San Francisco in 1959.

"The two cities are very much alike in layout and business activities," Gobovizin said. "But San Francisco has no ice, and we have plenty."